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## **Frequently asked questions about Washington's drought declaration process**

### **Who declares a drought emergency?**

Under RCW 43.83B.405, the Department of Ecology (not the governor) declares drought emergencies (by administrative order) in the state of Washington. Some of the confusion around this stems from the news conference the governor held in 2001 to "announce" Ecology's declaration of drought emergency. The governor must provide written approval for Ecology to issue a drought order.

### **What conditions must exist to declare a drought emergency?**

Under state law, Ecology must apply a two-part test before a drought emergency can be declared:

- 1) An area has to be experiencing or expected to experience less than 75 percent of normal water supply, and
- 2) An area must be expected to suffer undue hardships as a result of the dry conditions. Hardships can include crop failures, shortages of municipal water and barriers for fish passage.

### **Can Ecology declare a drought emergency without first receiving approval from the governor?**

No. Under state law, Ecology must obtain written approval from the governor before declaring a drought emergency.

### **What is the process for declaring a drought emergency?**

Under state law, a drought emergency contingency plan was developed and is maintained by the Department of Ecology to help guide state response to drought conditions. Under that plan, Ecology chairs a Water Supply Availability Committee composed of experts from federal agencies involved in monitoring, forecasting or managing state water supplies. The committee conducts ongoing water-supply monitoring and forecasting to identify possible drought conditions as early as possible. If an area is experiencing or projected to experience a water supply below 75 percent of normal, the committee informs the Governor's Office. If conditions warrant (based on the two-step test described above), the governor's Executive Water Emergency Committee can recommend that the governor authorize Ecology to declare a drought emergency.

### **What does the state's drought plan cover?**

The state has developed a comprehensive emergency management plan to help respond to various types of emergencies. As part of this comprehensive plan, Ecology has the lead role for

responding to drought. The department has developed a specific drought-contingency program that focuses on:

- Maintaining crucial energy supplies.
- Aiding state agriculture.
- Protecting public water supplies.
- Safeguarding stream flows for fish.
- Preparing to fight fires.

**Who is represented on the Water Supply Availability Committee?**

Besides Ecology, the committee is composed of representatives from the U.S. Geological Survey, National Weather Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Bonneville Power Administration.

**Who is represented on the Executive Water Emergency Committee?**

Besides the governor's office, this executive-level committee has representatives from the state departments of Agriculture, Ecology, Fish & Wildlife, Health, Military (Emergency Management Division), Natural Resources and Community, Trade and Economic Development, as well as the Washington Conservation Commission. Other agencies and organizations may participate, based on specific circumstances.

**What role does the governor have in declaring or managing a drought emergency?**

The governor's office chairs the Executive Water Emergency Committee, which assesses the information provided by the Water Supply Availability Committee to determine if any significant hardships will result from the below-normal water supplies. If the committee agrees that a drought declaration is in order, it forwards a drought emergency request to the governor. The committee also oversees state response to a drought on an ongoing basis, ensuring everything is done in a timely and appropriate manner.

**If Ecology declares a drought, will it be in effect statewide?**

Ecology can declare a drought emergency statewide or for specific areas. The last time drought was officially declared was March 14, 2001, the second-worst recorded drought – and it applied statewide. At other times over the years, drought emergencies have been declared for localized areas only.

**What's the difference between a drought and a drought emergency?**

Any time an area is experiencing or projected to experience 75 percent or less of normal water supply, that geographic area can be considered to have "drought conditions." However, in a "drought emergency," not only is the 75 percent or less of normal water-supply condition met, but undue hardships also are deemed likely to occur because of the water shortage.

**In a practical sense, what does a "declaration of drought emergency" mean?**

As the lead drought-response agency, Ecology can:

- Issue temporary water permits to expand capacity on existing wells.
- Permit previously-drilled emergency wells to be used.
- Permit new wells to be drilled or allow the use of alternative sources of water (on a faster basis than without the declaration).

**Do you know if and when a drought will be declared in 2004?**

Ecology, the Governor's Office and other state agencies are actively investigating and monitoring the situation to determine if the conditions specified in state law exist (e.g., the two-part test described above). While many areas are now experiencing less than 75 percent of normal water supply, we have not yet determined if undue hardships are likely to occur.